



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Kresge support for higher education in South Africa rests on shared qualities, challenges

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Welcome remarks delivered by Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson at the 2017 Siyaphumelela Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Welcome to the third annual Siyaphumelela Student Success Conference. Thank you for coming from across the country, and in some cases, from overseas, to be with us.

I also want to thank SAIDE and the Siyaphumelela national advisory committee for the enormous thought and preparation they've put into this conference and for their support of student success in South Africa. We are grateful for your leadership.

I would also like to thank Bill Moses, managing director of Kresge's Education Program, and his deputy, Caroline Altman Smith, for supporting this work. Most importantly, I want to thank Cynthia Kresge, one of our trustees and the great-granddaughter of our founder, Sebastian Kresge, for spending the week with us in South Africa. We have already had a wonderful visit and look forward very much to the conference.

It's exciting to be part of a gathering that has blossomed to include such a wide range of leaders and practitioners eager to improve student success. I understand there are more than 160 people registered for the conference. Thank you for your commitment to your students' success.

It is the depth of that commitment that brings you all here today. What may be a little less clear is why Kresge is here. Let me ask and answer that in three ways. First, why does Kresge – an American foundation – believe it important to work in South Africa? Second, if South Africa, why focus on universities? And third, if universities, why Siyaphumelela?

Why South Africa?

Why does an American foundation that focuses its investments on promoting social and economic opportunity for low-income people in United States cities work in South Africa?

International Interconnection

A first reason is that – despite the rhetoric of the current administration in Washington –it is impossible to understand or navigate the world today by carrying the perspective of a single nation. Our long-time trustee Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University, consistently reminds us that all institutions of import are international citizens, with virtually every problem we face – whether climate change, terrorism, the resilience of cities, health pandemics, or drug trafficking – defying single-nation solution.

History of Racial Injustice

But a second reason is tied more directly to South Africa itself – and that is that I believe that the United States and this great nation share so many qualities and challenges.

We are two of the most racially diverse nations on earth and both struggle with profoundly deep inequities. On one hand, South Africa has perhaps the world’s highest Gini coefficient. On the other hand, the United States has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the OECD and our poorest citizens – despite our great wealth and public pronouncements of the American Dream – find it exceedingly difficult to reach the upper echelons of our society. For example, about 70 percent of Americans in the top quartile of income attain a university degree by age 25, while only about one in 10 students from the lowest quartile do – and the gap has been growing for decades.

Our two countries also share a legacy of brutal white supremacy. From slavery and colonialism in both countries, to the eradication of indigenous peoples, a civil war, and Jim Crow segregation in the United States, and apartheid here in South Africa. And we share the challenge of coming to grip with these legacies in a way that neither denies their invidiousness nor constructs impenetrable barriers to progress.

The Democratic Experiment

That suggests a third reason Kresge has wanted to invest in South Africa: the inspiration you continue to provide our nation – indeed, all nations. When I first visited South Africa, you were barely a decade into your democratic journey – the optimism, the excitement, and the trepidation were palpable. Some dozen years later, that journey continues to inspire. Even with all the complexities and disappointments and setbacks. Because you have found a way to interrogate your history in profound and authentic ways terms to recommit continuously to creating a more perfect union. All of you, who fought for democracy in your lifetimes, know that a healthy democracy is a fragile thing.

That was so powerfully evident during the time Bill, Caroline, Cynthia and I spent yesterday with Albie Sachs at the Constitutional Court and Number Four. In one breath, there were the stories of Albie’s legal defense of people charged under the racial statutes and security laws and his imprisonment and exile. But then in a second breath, there were the stories of the drafting of the constitution and the early decisions of the court to solidify the nobility and inviolability of the nation’s new and fundamental constitutional principles.

To say that it was inspiring doesn’t do it justice. Here, side-by-side, were not just Albie’s stories, but the cells in which Gandhi and Mandela were held and the chambers in which Albie and his colleagues safeguarded the ability of the South African people to create a beacon of human reconciliation and to construct an unprecedented vision of nonracial democracy.

We like to think that we, in the United States, can also inspire others. A 250-year history of stable, and occasionally enlightened, self-governance is a noble and noteworthy accomplishment. But that sense of inspiration is proving harder and harder to cling to, as we become increasingly paralyzed by partisan divides; as we seem to be guided less by principle than by polls; and as we appear to embrace the replacement of a president of transcendent decency and intelligence with – well, let me simply say, with something less than that.

So, like South Africa, the United States has its warts and its ulcers. But like South Africa, the United States remains

committed to overcoming our deepest, most intractable challenges – in democratic governance, in economic fairness, in racial justice. We both have a great deal to learn from the other as we recommit to the unending task of building a just and inclusive society.

Why Universities?

Permit me to use that thought as a transition to the second broad question, which is why Kresge would choose to invest in South African Universities.

Stated simply, we see powerful parallels between both the value propositions and the challenges – economic, democratic and social – presented by a university education in both countries.

First, the parallels in the economic case for postsecondary education.

If you want to be successful economically in the 21st century, you are going to have to have a quality postsecondary credential. Whether in America or South Africa, the pathway for economic opportunity and security for low-income people is a university credential.

South Africa has the world's greatest return on investment for a university degree. Full stop. Similarly, Americans with an associate's degree earn more than \$250,000 over their lifetimes than people with only a high school diploma; with a bachelor's degree, that figure rises to more than \$1 million.

And yet, high costs in both countries are squeezing out the “missing middle.”

Half of all South Africans enrolled in universities won't graduate, accruing debt and ending up with very little to show for their efforts. The reasons they don't complete are manifold: weak preparation, poverty, outdated institutional policies and, unfortunately, sometimes indifferent campus environments.

The American side of the coin is not so terribly different. Whereas 65 percent to 70 percent of adults have attended a postsecondary institution, only about 45 percent have completed a credential. And the causes are – at least in broad strokes – not so different. Many students walk onto campus ill-prepared. The student supports in too many institutions are underdeveloped and poorly administered. The pressures on low-income students can become overwhelming – for example, one in seven U.S. community college students – where about half of all Americans are being educated – are homeless.

The second parallel is the centrality of universities to basic institutions of democracy.

Although daily realities are often messy and compromised, universities provide the bedrock affirmation of a democratic order's animating principles. They refute fake news with facts. They find truth through evidence. They offer the armature of reasoned public discourse. They cure diseases, advance cultural innovations and refine new technologies

Under apartheid, many academics resisted and documented the horrors of laws and policies and attitudes that were anathema to civilized society. Who could have imagined that today, in the United States, academics are taking a page from that book? Sheltering data on climate change from a central government bent on deconstructing basic tenets of scientific inquiry. Promoting open and honest exchange about society's most divisive and polarizing issues. Providing a counterweight to a Twittersphere oblivious to the consequences of ignoring history and demonizing academic inquest.

The third parallel is that universities in both countries are struggling with the complexities of social tolerance and political engagement.

I must tell you that it was very difficult to watch from Detroit the tumult in your country surrounding #RhodesMustFall.

We were certainly aware of the long, complex and often painful effects of student movements on South African campuses – both during the struggle (against apartheid) and after the establishment of democracy. But this felt different. To a distant observer, it seemed to suggest a new – perhaps dark - turn in your campus politics. It seemed to reveal fissures within society that couldn't easily be closed. It appeared to recalibrate the tenuous balance between legitimate grievance and politically-propelled disruption.

I look forward to learning more from you about this and what you think the future holds.

But I mention it because – once again – American universities are not immune from some of the same seismic forces. We aren't going to experience a nationwide strike. But we are witnessing powerful social, political and academic tensions emerge on campuses across our country. Yale fought bitterly over the renaming a residential college, named from one of the 19th century's foremost white supremacists. Others have seen student and faculty protests about the continuing presence of confederate statues or flags. And countless others have been disrupted by walkouts and rallies in opposition to inviting, or banning, speakers holding controversial views.

All to say that Kresge's approach to higher education in the states has much to learn from you – and we hope the reverse is true as well.

Why Siyaphumelela?

So that's why South Africa and why higher education. That leaves why Siyaphumelela.

The answer is straight-forward: Our delivery on the promise of higher education continues to fall short.

For all the reasons I've mentioned, that is not acceptable. Our collective commitment to improving student outcomes and graduating more low-income students is growing more important, not less.

But we too often wrap these conversations in a sense of pessimism and futility. Mired in our present difficulties, it's hard to imagine that anything can be different. If you'll indulge me for just a moment, I want to suggest that that need not be the case.

Over the last 50 years, Kresge's hometown of Detroit has been brought to its knees by population loss, the flight of investment capital from the city, a series of financial scandals and a climate of political corruption. This all came to a head with the city's declaration of bankruptcy in 2013, the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history. We had hit bottom.

And yet, to make a very long story short, the city had put in place over the last decade a set of strategies that have enabled it to roar back. The population is starting to tick up. The private sector is buttressing the city with unprecedented levels of investment. A new mayoral administration has balanced the books, paved the roads, turned on the lights and stopped the spread of neighborhood blight. Philanthropy is promoting small-business development, public transportation, the creation of parks and open space and expanded provision of early childhood development services.

The work is far from done. But Detroit has been transformed over the course of a mere decade. And Detroiters are optimistic that the best is yet to come. An example that a give-up-on-it, turn-the-lights-out situation can be moved to a different trajectory.

I want to argue that that is the case for postsecondary achievement as well.

Universities have for decades sought to serve increasing numbers of more diverse and less well-prepared students, but with far too few successes to show and graduation rates stubbornly low, and in some cases, declining.

One response frequently heard from faculty, alumni and university leaders is that universities have to raise admissions standards to solve the problem. But you hardly need me to tell you that although this might end up increasing graduate rates at a few institutions, it's certainly not the answer for the majority of our institutions.

So, let me tell you about one institution that came up with a different answer.

Less than 10 years ago, a new president arrived at Georgia State University with all the pressures so many universities face: ever-more diverse students showing up on its doorstep, admissions scores dropping and rising numbers of low-income students being admitted. That president, Mark Becker, was advised to confront these issues by emulating his highly selective competition across town.

Mark came to a very different conclusion, however. He believed that if his institution admitted students, it had a moral imperative to ensure that those students were successful.

Perhaps because he was trained as a biostatistician and is a fellow of the American Statistical Association, Becker looked to data – 800 separate data points to be precise – to see when and why students were failing.

What surprised Georgia State was that although some of the reasons for failure were academically rooted, many were tied to the practices of the institution itself. They began testing a spectrum of interventions, asking questions like:

- Does sending warning text messages help or discourage students?
- Would centralized, professional academic advising improve results?
- Could changing course sequences improve outcomes?
- Could emergency retention grants help successful students remain in university when they faced financial challenges?

The results have been spectacular. These interventions, and countless others, have helped Georgia State shorten the time to degree, saving both the institution and its students millions of dollars and dramatically increasing graduation numbers. Georgia State, a university that was once a bastion of the Old South's segregation policies, now confers more degrees to African Americans than any other American institution – the first time this has occurred at a non-historically black college or university. And, in what is probably higher education's holy grail, Georgia State has removed all race-based outcome differences – at Georgia State, African Americans, Whites and Latinos secure degrees at the same rate.

The take-aways are crystal clear. Change is possible. Carefully constructed and curated data are indispensable tools. Interventions designed in relatively quick-turn around periods can materially contribute to student success.

And it's not just a one-off. We're witnessing improvements at Achieving the Dream and University Innovation institutions in the United States and at Siyaphumelela institutions in South Africa.

So, there's the answer to why Siyaphumelela.

Conclusion

For the next few days, you are going to hear from colleagues, both international and local, who have become champions of evidence-based approaches to student success.

You'll have an opportunity to discuss how best to use big data to support students and institutional reform. You'll see presentations about new pathways in developmental mathematics, better academic advising. You'll have conversations about the first-year experience.

So, have a productive and robust conference. It is the kind of gathering that gives us at Kresge every confidence that South Africa will be bold, will lead with intelligence and compassion and will once again show the world that deeply

inclusive, just and respectful change is not only possible, but necessary for the future of our children and our children's children.

Thank you for listening.